

## CREATION OF THE YELLOW PERIL: A STUDY OF AMERICA'S EARLY CHINESE IMMIGRANTS

Patricia Leong Kappel

Lured to *Gum San* ("The Gold Mountain") by the discovery of gold in California in 1848, thousands of Chinese men left their families and a homeland, wrought with drought, floods, famine, and rebellion. Unlike most European immigrants before them, the early Chinese had no intention of building a new life in America; instead, they were intent upon securing their fortunes and returning home to their families. However, racism, nativism, and exclusion distinguished the experience of these Chinese immigrants from that of their European counterparts, and altered the course of their lives.

Competition for gold was only one reason why the welcome extended the Chinese was short-lived. As the flow of Chinese immigrants increased, their numbers magnified their racial and cultural differences in a society grown increasingly intolerant and suspicious of foreigners. Their non-assimilation into a non-receptive culture fueled xenophobic fears that were exacerbated by the "contrary" presence exhibited by the Chinese in their appearance, dress, speech, and customs. In the Chinatowns, opium dens and prostitution flourished from the trade of the majority male population, whose bachelor life was imposed by restrictive, discriminatory immigration practices that kept wives and families from entering the United States. However, the White perception of Chinese immorality and criminality was ignited, and it intensified the collusive work of nativists and U.S. labor to take action against the influx of these "wage-busting" immigrants. As a result, educational, economic, social, and political barriers were erected, many by U.S. legislation, which included the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, naming the Chinese as the only people in United States history to be specifically barred from American emigration.

This societal banishment of the Chinese created insulated and isolated communities. In these Chinatowns, the Chinese found refuge from murder and persecution through benevolent associations, similar to those formed around clans in China. With help from outside groups like the Methodist Mission House and the YWCA, the Six Companies, later known as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA), provided a link to homeland and eventually to the White culture. The CCBA became a social, economic, and political force, which strengthened and established stability in this Confucian-based culture. Through the efforts of the CCBA and the assistance of sympathetic outside supporters, the Chinese survived the oppression of a hostile host culture and transitioned into American society to become a "model minority."

Though both voluntary and involuntary isolation inhibited the assimilation and acculturation of the Chinese into the American mainstream, in time, education facilitated mutual acceptance. Formal educational institutions had shunned the Chinese, but they acquired the key to assimilation---language---from service organizations like the YMCA, the church, and their own Chinese benevolent societies. How the early American Chinese responded to and survived racism and discrimination is a study that merits greater illumination in our nation's history. Moreover, the study of the Chinese experience unveils the important role of education in this people's American history, a role largely absent from the literature on adult education. This omission in the history of adult education deprives practitioners of a perspective that could inform practice that serves ethnic and cultural minorities. Therefore, the American experiences of cultures like the Chinese mandate closer examination by adult education for their potential contributions to the understanding and knowledge of the education and learning of diverse peoples.

---

Patricia Leong Kappel, W-2 Projects Coordinator, Milwaukee Area Technical College,  
700 West State Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 53233.  
Presented at the Midwest Research-to-Practice Conference in Adult, Continuing, and Community  
Education, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL, October 9-11, 2002.